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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000711

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PROTESTS PEACEFUL, OPPOSITION TURNOUT LESS THAN HOPED

REF: TBILISI 693

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The much anticipated April 9 protests proceeded peacefully, lasting about 6 hours from 2pm to 8pm. Non-parliamentary opposition leaders gave President Saakashvili twenty-four hours to resign or they will engage in further actions. The bulk of the protest took place in front of Parliament although a sizable portion broke away at 4:30pm to protest in front of the Public Broadcaster. The protests were covered extensively by the local media. Organizers asked the crowd to return on April 10 at 3pm and only a small group of protesters remained overnight in front of Parliament. There was no visible police presence except for a small group of guards near Parliament. Estimates vary about the crowd size. MOIA estimated the crowd at roughly 25,000; while observers affiliated with the Caucasus Research Center put the estimate at 50,000 at its peak. Embassy Observers believe the crowd ranged from 30,000 to 40,000. There was also a small protest of about a 1,000 in Batumi. On April 10, President Saakashvili publicly thanked the protesters for demonstrating peacefully and responsibly, said he understood why people were frustrated, and said the GOG was still willing to engage in dialogue. Approximately 5,000-10,000 protesters turned up for the April 10 follow-up rally. The non-parliamentary opposition leaders pledged to engage in civil disobedience by picketing and blocking roads until Saakashvili resigns. They plan on protesting at the Presidential Palace, the Public Broadcaster, and Parliament everyday from 3pm until 9pm. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: The non-parliamentary opposition organized a sizable crowd but nowhere near the 100,000-200,000 they predicted. Despite the modest turnout, the non-parliamentary opposition did not deviate from its repeated demand for Saakashvili's resignation. Saakashvili's April 10 statement appears to us to capture the general sense of the public who may be dissatisfied with current economic and political conditions, but who are tired of the tactics of protests and ultimatums. We have heard from many that while they are unhappy with the government, they are also unhappy with the opposition. The decision to picket and block traffic could increase tensions and could be an attempt to force some sort of confrontation with the police. We are continuing to urge all sides to show restraint and encourage dialogue, and will observe the protests closely. End Comment.

Protests Start - Crowd Subdued

¶3. (C) The long-awaited April 9 protest started at 2pm local time. Channel 1, Imedi, and Rustavi showed some live coverage of the rallies, while Maestro and Kavkasia showed the rallies in their entirety. (Embassy Note: Channel 1, Imedi, and Rustavi all provided live coverage during their news updates which were extended to allow for more coverage but did not have non-stop coverage. Maestro and Kavkasia provided live non-stop coverage until roughly 7 or 8pm. End Note.). Initial estimates of the crowd varied from 50,000 (based on an estimate by the Caucasus Research Center) to

25,000 by the MOIA (based on aerial photos) to 30-40,000 (based on Embassy Observer estimates). (Embassy Note: The MOIA estimate was arrived at in part with Austrian and Hungarian police experts and other international law enforcement observers who actually thought the MOIA numbers were too high. End Note.). The consensus among the observers was that 2 pm represented the high-water mark and observers was that 2 pm represented the high-water mark and the crowd started to slowly dissipate throughout the day. Various speakers stood on a stage set up in front of Parliament and gave speeches. Apart from an occasional applause line, the crowd was very subdued.

¶4. (C) The crowd was generally middle aged with few people prepared for a continuous protest (no sleeping bags or warm clothes). We estimate that as much as half the crowd had little interest in the protest per se but were simply on Rustaveli Avenue to see the event. Embassy observers saw people chatting with friends, milling around, and only about half the crowd faced the speakers at any given time. The opposition did not have music or any other means of entertaining the crowd between speeches and the sound system they used worked poorly. The GoG followed through on its promise to have minimal police presence, and thus far, appears to have learned valuable lessons from the November 2007 protests. All sides deserve credit for keeping the rally peaceful.

¶5. (C) The public defender's office, priests, self-identified party members, and NGO volunteers all served as observers to help ensure the rally remained peaceful. Embassy observers noticed a visible police presence only near Parliament which consisted of a few officers, who did not

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engage with protesters. The speeches varied from somewhat moderate to hysterical, though crowd reaction remained largely apathetic regardless of the speaker addressing the crowd. Labor Party Leader, Shalva Natelashvili got the best response. Notably, Nino Burjanadze was loudly booed when she spoke. She indicated that she understood the crowd's frustration, but asked them to understand her move from government to opposition was "for the people." Burjanadze later claimed those who whistled and booed were GoG plants. By 4 pm both speakers and some among the crowd were urging protesters to remain (Embassy Note: Post estimated the crowd at roughly 20-25,000 at this point. End Note.).

The Protests Move

¶6. (C) At roughly 4:30pm, a group of 5,000-10,000 led by Levan Gachechiladze and Goga Khaindrava left the Parliament and headed to the Public Broadcaster's building in what seemed to be a semi-spontaneous idea rather than a pre-planned maneuver. Only about half of the original group made it to the Public Broadcaster's office which is over a mile walk away. Goga Khaindrava took the microphone and said that the protesters would storm the building unless the Public Broadcaster let them in and acceded to their "demands". Other speakers spoke of a round the clock picketing action. A brief scuffle appeared to break out between protesters and a security guard. However, the Public Broadcaster agreed to let three representatives in to conduct negotiations. According to the MOIA, Levan Gachicheladze, Koba Davitashvili (Party of the People), and Zviad Dzidziguri (Conservative Party) were allowed to enter the building to negotiate. Gachechiladze's reported demand was that that Channel 1 provide live (though intermittent) coverage of the protests which the Public Broadcaster agreed to do. (Embassy Note: This was a bizarre request considering that the Public Broadcaster had already been providing what Gachechiladze demanded. Gachechiladze then demanded 6 minutes of live airtime every day for himself personally, a demand which was rejected. End Note.). They also reportedly requested that Channel 1 show the Patriarch's speech on April 9 in its entirety and issue invitations for opposition leaders to

appear on public talk shows. Once the "demands" were met, Gachechiladze returned to the street and addressed the crowd which had now dwindled to roughly 2,000 people.

Subsequently, Khaindrava claimed that 3,000 special forces troops were inside the building and ready to attack the crowd. Khaindrava stated that they would move back to Parliament to avoid bloodshed. The crowds reaction was largely one of confused looks and silence. After the announcement, about 500-1,000 of the protesters walked back and joined the group in front of Parliament at roughly 6:30pm. By this time, the crowd had dwindled significantly and Embassy observers could make their way into the crowd, directly in front of the stage.

Let's Call it a Day - And Back on April 10

¶17. (C) Speakers continued to implore protesters to stay or if they left, to come back with two additional people. As of 7pm the crowd had dwindled to roughly 5,000 protesters. At that time, Levan Gachechiladze asked for protesters to return at 10am on April 10. After some brief discussion with other leaders, he revised the time to 3pm. In a press conference, Irakli Alasania claimed that he conservatively estimated 125,000 people were at the rally (Embassy Note: This claim does not withstand even minimal scrutiny. End Note.). Alasania said that if Saakashvili did not resign, the QAlasania said that if Saakashvili did not resign, the non-parliamentary opposition would announce a further action plan. Non-parliamentary leaders did not provide any clarity into further actions until the April 10 rally where they said they would engage in "civil disobedience". Nino Burjanadze claimed that the protests had "really scared the authorities". (Embassy Comment: Post is unsure if certain opposition members are putting a positive spin on events or actually believe their own rhetoric. End Comment). A few supporters stayed overnight in front of Parliament, singing, dancing and drinking. A number appeared on TV news programs to be intoxicated (including some lesser "leaders") and dancing late into the night.

¶18. (C) About 5,000-10,000 protesters returned to Parliament on April 10 at 3 pm and listened to another round of speeches made by opposition leaders. The new plan outlined asked protesters to return to the Parliament each day at 3 pm. At that time, orders would be given and protesters would move to designated locations (i.e. the President's office in Avlabari and the Public Broadcaster's office) to engage in unspecified "acts of civil disobedience," before returning to Parliament at 9 pm. It is unclear as to how many protesters will follow these instructions and whether they can continue this kind of activity over the weekend and into orthodox holy week.

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GoG Remains Calm - Continues to Offer Dialogue

¶19. (C) In spite of claims by the non-parliamentary opposition, GoG contacts tell us that they intend to let the protests continue if they remain non-violent. Security Council Chief Eka Tkeshalashvili told the Ambassador that Georgian law enforcement is under strict orders to avoid confrontation. The Ambassador urged her to maintain maximum restraint. Tkeshalashvili reassured the Ambassador that the GoG had no intentions of using force to disperse the protests, but agreed that the coming days might be more dangerous as the crowd dwindles and becomes more desperate. In this backdrop, President Saakashvili called for dialogue saying "yesterday was a very important for our democracy, one part of our society has expressed its will." Saakashvili went on to express his gratitude to the protesters for remaining peaceful and indicated that he understood why some were upset with him. Saakashvili then called on all sides to work together to solve Georgia's problems.

TEFFT